

“Bringing Learning to Life: Essential Factors of Play-Based Learning at Home – A Case Study of Mazabuka, Zambia”

Natasha R Nyangwete*, Noah K Sichula, Bibian Kalinde

University of Zambia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400485>

Received: 01 April 2024; Revised: 12 April 2024; Accepted: 16 April 2025; Published: 23 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This article analysis's the essential Factors that support play-based learning in a peri-urban home environment in Zambia. It is drawn from a study that explored the influence of the home environment on play based learning in early childhood education in Mazabuka District. The study was guided by three research objectives, a qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 25 participants, including five early childhood education teachers and 20 family members in Mazabuka District, Zambia. Thematic analysis revealed that the availability of indoor and outdoor play spaces fosters exploration and learning, and a hazard-free environment were crucial in promoting secure play. Parental involvement varied with active participation. The study underscores the importance of a supportive home environment in enhancing play-based learning experiences. It recommends that parents create structured play areas, ensure safety, and actively participate at home in their children's learning through play.

Keywords: Play-based learning, home environment, parental involvement, early childhood education, safety in play.

INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning is a widely recognized approach in early childhood education, providing children with opportunities to develop critical cognitive, social, and emotional skills through interactive and exploratory activities. Scholars like Henricks (2023) supported by Mwansa and Tembo (2023) argue that play is not merely a recreational activity but a vital tool for learning, fostering creativity, problem-solving abilities, and social competence. Within the formal education system in Zambia, play-based learning has been integrated into the early childhood education curricula, demonstrating its effectiveness in promoting holistic child development (Ministry of Education, 2023).

According to Phiri and Banda (2021) beyond formal schooling, learning extends into community settings, where children interact with peers, caregivers, and community members, further enriching their knowledge and social skills. Community learning initiatives, such as structured playgroups and child-friendly spaces, provide an extended support system that complements formal education. However, home-based learning remains the most fundamental and continuous form of early learning, shaping children's foundational experiences and behaviours (Moyo & Dube, 2020). The home environment serves as the first learning space where children acquire language, cognitive abilities, and socio-emotional skills through play.

Play-Based Learning (PBL) has been increasingly recognized as a fundamental approach to early childhood education in Zambia (MoE, 2023), with the home environment playing a critical role in shaping children's learning experiences. For this reason, PBL is now the official pedagogical approach for early childhood education in Zambia, (Kaluba, Phiri, & Banda, 2024). Over the years, Zambia has developed various policies and frameworks to guide the implementation of PBL, such as the Learning through 'Play' in Early Education: Teacher's Manual (2021) and the Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE Teachers (2020), both of which reinforce the significance of play in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth in early learners (Kalinde, Banda & Munsaka 2024). These policies highlight the importance of creating a supportive environment

both in schools and at home to maximize the benefits of play-based learning.

The home environment serves as the first educational setting for children, providing the foundational experiences that shape their early learning (Ndlovu, 2021). Early childhood experiences within the home - such as interactive play with parents, access to play materials, and exposure to safe and stimulating play space - lay the groundwork for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Factors such as the availability of play spaces, safety considerations, and parental engagement significantly influence how children interact with and benefit from PBL. According to Mwale and Chirwa (2022), children in homes with adequate play resources and involved caregivers demonstrate higher levels of engagement and creativity in learning activities. These homes provide an environment where children can explore, experiment, and develop problem-solving skills essential for early learning.

Conversely, economic and social challenges within households may hinder children's ability to engage in meaningful play experiences, thereby limiting the benefits of PBL (Mulenga & Phiri, 2022). Households with limited financial resources may struggle to provide toys, books, and other play materials, while constraints such as overcrowding or unsafe environments can restrict opportunities for free movement and exploration. Cultural attitudes towards play also play a role in shaping children's learning experiences at home. In some communities, play is viewed as a leisure activity rather than an essential component of learning, leading to minimal parental involvement in play-based educational activities (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017).

Zambia's policy frameworks have continuously emphasized the need for synergy between home and school environments to maximize the impact of PBL. The Education Sector Skills Plan (2017-2021) advocates for integrating early childhood education strategies with national development goals, recognizing that play fosters essential skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction. Similarly, the Teacher's Curriculum Implementation Guide (2020) and the Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus (2015) provide guidelines on how play should be incorporated into early education while also acknowledging the role of parents and caregivers in sustaining learning through play at home. These policies stress that play is not merely a school-based activity but a learning process that extends into the home, requiring active participation from parents and guardians.

Mulenga & Phiri (2023) indicate that teachers' effective implementation of PBL enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Research has further demonstrated the positive relationship between play-based pedagogy and children's holistic development (Chileshe & Mwape, 2021). However, the successful adoption of PBL relies not only on educators but also on parents and guardians who create enabling environments at home. According to Munsaka and Kalinde (2017), homes with adequate play spaces and resources provide children with more opportunities to develop essential skills such as communication, collaboration, and independent thinking. In contrast, households facing financial and social constraints may struggle to support children's engagement in PBL activities, leading to disparities in learning outcomes.

Recognizing the significance of the home environment in play-based learning highlights the need for a holistic approach that bridges the gap between home and school (Kalinde et al., 2024). While schools have increasingly embraced play-based learning (PBL) through policies and teacher training, the home remains a crucial learning space that shapes children's early development (Niklas, Cohrsen, Lehl & Napoli 2021). Parents and caregivers are central in creating safe and stimulating environments that allow children to fully benefit from play. Understanding what enables or hinders play-based learning at home offers valuable insights into how families and educators can work together to strengthen early childhood education.

Play-based learning is widely recognised as a crucial component of early childhood development, fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017). Research indicates that children's home environments significantly influence the effectiveness of play-based learning (Mulenga & Phiri 2023). However, informal home-based play remains a less studied but equally vital aspect of child development. What remains unclear are the essential factors that shape play-based learning at home. Specifically, there is limited knowledge

on how caregivers facilitate play, the types of play materials accessible to children, and the extent to which cultural perceptions influence home-based learning experiences. Failure to investigate this aspect may result in

missed opportunities to enhance early childhood development through home-based play strategies. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the essential factors that contribute to play-based learning at home in Mazabuka, Zambia.

Statement of the problem

Play-based learning has been widely recognized as a critical approach to early childhood development, especially for fostering creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction in young children (Chileshe & Mwape 2021). While structured play is often implemented in formal preschool settings, there is growing interest in the role of the home environment in supporting play-based learning. However, what remains unclear are the essential factors within the home that influence the effectiveness of play-based learning for children. This knowledge gap makes it difficult for educators and policymakers to design support systems that reinforce play-based learning beyond the classroom. If this study is not undertaken, there is a risk that the potential of the home environment to support early childhood development through play will remain untapped, possibly widening learning disparities among children in different socio-economic contexts.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the essential factors that influence play-based learning at home in Mazabuka, Zambia.

Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To determine the elements of PBL in the home environment.
- ii. To establish family perceptions towards PBL in the home environment Mazabuka District.
- iii. To establish the influence of home environment on play based learning in ECE centers Mazabuka District.

Scope of the study

The study was deliberately confined to interactions between the home environment and Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres, with a specific focus on Play-Based Learning. Other methodologies and pedagogies within ECE were not examined. The research included only children attending ECE centres in Mazabuka District, along with their guardians and teachers, to provide a focused perspective on the relationship between play-based learning and the home environment. Furthermore, the study targeted participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds within Mazabuka to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of varying home environments.

METHODOLOGY

This context provided an avenue for the exploration of the essential Factors that support play-based learning at home. To achieve this purpose, a qualitative research approach was employed, allowing for an in-depth investigation into how home environment factors, such as parental involvement, availability of play materials, and household routines, influence children's engagement in play-based learning. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the perceptions of participants, providing a rich understanding of the contextual dynamics that shape play-based learning within the home environment (Williams, 2016). The flexibility of qualitative research was instrumental in allowing the study to explore emerging themes and patterns in a naturalistic setting, providing a more nuanced view of how various home Factors either enhance or hinder play-based learning (Denzin, 2017). By prioritizing participants' narratives, the study was able to generate insights that might not

have been captured through quantitative methods, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the role of home-based factors in supporting play-based learning. Studies on PBL (Keung, and Cheung, 2019; Ali, et al. 2018;

Taylor and Boyer, 2020) have been conducted in school environments involving teachers and learners and few have involved parents.

The study was conducted in Mazabuka, a peri-urban district located in Southern Zambia. The provision of early childhood education in the district is dominated by the government with few players from the private sector and non-governmental organizations. As of 2024 there were 58 Early Childhood Education Centers (ECE) in Mazabuka, established out of the existing 86 government and community schools (Mazabuka District Council, 2024). This is an increase from 22 ECE centres in 2017. However, for most of them there is need to set up proper infrastructure such as play areas and classrooms. The Policy Monitoring and Research Centre (2017) report Mazabuka has been low ECE activities in Southern Province including the number of ECE centres. The entire province was reported to have 171 ECE Teachers, showing a shortfall in Teacher requirements, though intervention has been done through administrative engagement of community teachers.

A total of (n=25) participants were selected and recruited in this study, comprising (n=5) early childhood education teachers and (n=20) family members from various households in Mazabuka District. The ECE centres were randomly sample from the 58 ECE centres in the district. The study employed purposive sampling to identify and recruit participants who could provide in-depth insights into the home Factors that support play-based learning. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as it enabled the selection of individuals with relevant experiences and knowledge regarding children's play-based learning within home settings (Yin 2018).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria The five early childhood education teachers were selected based on their expertise and direct involvement in facilitating play-based learning. Their perspectives were crucial in understanding how home environments complement school-based play activities. Meanwhile, the 20 family members were drawn from households with young children engaged in play-based learning. These participants included parents and guardians who play a primary role in shaping the home environment, making them well-positioned to provide valuable insights into factors such as availability of play materials, parental engagement, and safety considerations. By employing purposive sampling, the study ensured that the selected participants had relevant knowledge and experiences necessary to address the research questions. This approach enhanced the study's ability to generate rich, contextually grounded data on the essential Factors for PBL in the home environment.

Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which were instrumental in gathering detailed qualitative insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding play-based learning at home. This method was chosen because it provided flexibility in probing deeper into responses while allowing participants to share their perspectives freely (Scott 2019). Focus group discussions were also held with selected caregivers and educators to facilitate interactive discussions and uncover shared experiences and divergent viewpoints (Taherdoost 2016). These discussions enhanced the study's depth by allowing participants to reflect on and build upon each other's insights.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, which allowed for the identification of patterns and themes emerging from participants' responses. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provided a systematic way of organizing and interpreting qualitative data, ensuring that findings accurately captured participants lived experiences (Ndlovu & Mthembu 2021). The analysis process involved transcribing interviews and focus group discussions, coding data into meaningful categories, and identifying recurring themes that aligned with the study's research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings are presented in line with the research questions. These included.

1. What play spaces are available within the home environment?
2. What safety considerations are present in-home settings?
3. What is the role of parental engagement in facilitating play-based learning?

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Accessibility of Play Spaces	Physical Space Constraints Indoor vs. Outdoor Play Dynamics Shared vs. Private Play Areas Socioeconomic Factors and Play Accessibility
Safety Considerations in Play-Based Learning	Hazard Prevention in Play Areas Parental Supervision and Play Safety Teaching Children About Safety Modifications to Play Areas for Safety
Parental Engagement in Play-Based Learning	Active Participation in Play Providing Play Materials Encouraging Independent Play Balancing Play with Other Responsibilities

Accessibility of Play Spaces

This theme addresses research question number one, which was investigating the accessibility of play spaces within the home environment. Table one indicates that while play spaces are present in many households, their accessibility varies depending on factors like household size, environmental layout, and parental perceptions of play. Through interviews and focus group discussions, four key sub-themes emerged: physical space constraints, indoor versus outdoor play dynamics, shared versus private play areas, and the role of socioeconomic factors in accessibility.

Physical Space Constraints

One of the significant barriers identified was the limitation of physical space within households. Many parents reported that their homes had small yards or overcrowded living areas, restricting children's freedom to play.

"We have a small house with many people, so my child only plays in one small corner inside," said P6, with similar sentiments echoed by P11: *"Since we live in an apartment, my child mostly plays in the passage or waits until we visit relatives with bigger spaces."*

Teachers also raised concerns about restricted play areas, stating that children with limited space at home may have difficulties engaging in active or exploratory play. T3 observed,

"Limited space affects the variety of activities children can engage in. Those with bigger yards often have more play options." While these physical constraints are apparent, the study also found that many parents made efforts to designate specific play areas, even within the confines of small spaces.

Indoor vs. Outdoor Play Dynamics

The study highlighted that the availability and use of indoor versus outdoor play spaces were influenced by

household structure and parental preferences. Some parents favoured indoor play for safety reasons, while others encouraged outdoor play for physical activity. P2 mentioned,

"My child mostly plays indoors because I worry about accidents outside." In contrast, P9 expressed, *"I prefer my child playing outside because there's more space, and they interact with other children."*

Teachers indicated that both indoor and outdoor environments contribute to children's development. T5 stated, *"Indoor play supports creativity and problem-solving, while outdoor play enhances physical and social skills."*

Shared vs. Private Play Areas

A significant determinant of play space accessibility was whether children played in shared community areas or private family spaces. Some parents allowed their children to play in communal spaces, while others preferred private areas for play. P13 shared,

"My child plays with neighbours' children outside; we don't have much space inside." Conversely, P7 preferred a private play area for their child, stating,

"We created a small play area just for our child to ensure they are safe and comfortable." Teachers noted that children playing in shared spaces experienced more peer interaction, while those with private spaces had more structured and individualized play. T1 commented, *"Shared play spaces promote peer interaction, which is important for social development."*

socioeconomic Factors and Play Accessibility

The study also found that a household's socioeconomic status influenced both the accessibility and quality of play spaces. Families with higher incomes often had more structured play areas, such as swings and slides, while those with fewer resources relied on improvised materials. P5 stated,

"We bought some swings and slides for our children to play in the yard," while P12 explained, *"We don't have many toys, but my child plays with what we find—bottles, old tires, and stones."* Teachers recognized that while access to formal play resources might differ by income, children from all socioeconomic backgrounds still engage in meaningful play. T4 noted, *"Children are creative; even with simple materials, they find ways to play and learn."*

The study's findings provide insight into the varied factors that affect the accessibility of play spaces in the home environment. The research shows that while physical space, parental preferences, shared versus private play settings, and socioeconomic status play significant roles in determining accessibility, children's adaptability and creativity often help mitigate some of these barriers.

Safety Considerations in Play-Based Learning

This theme addresses research question number two, which examined safety considerations in play-based learning within the home environment. The study found that parents and caregivers placed significant emphasis on ensuring that play areas were safe, prioritizing hazard prevention, supervision, child awareness of risks, and modifications made to enhance safety. These measures were observed to shape children's play experiences and overall engagement. The following sub-themes emerged: hazard prevention, parental supervision, teaching children about safety, and modifications to play areas for safety.

Hazard Prevention in Play Areas

A key concern among parents was ensuring that children's play spaces were free from potential dangers. Many parents reported actively removing hazardous objects such as sharp tools, electrical appliances, and breakable items from play areas. P3 stated,

"I make sure there are no sharp objects around, and I lock away anything that can hurt them." P8 added, *"Before they start playing, I check the area to see if there's anything unsafe, like broken glass or nails."* Teachers emphasized the importance of these precautionary measures, as unsafe environments could lead to injuries and disrupt the learning process. T2 remarked, *"Children need a safe environment to explore freely without getting hurt."*

Parental Supervision and Play Safety

The study found that the level of supervision varied among households, with some parents closely monitoring their children's play while others allowed more independent exploration. Some parents preferred to be present during playtime to ensure safety.

P6 noted, "I don't leave them alone; I sit nearby and watch." P14 added, "If they are playing outside, I check on them often to see what they are doing." On the other hand, some parents believed in giving children space while maintaining occasional supervision. P10 shared, "I don't always stand over them, but I make sure I hear what's happening." Teachers pointed out that while close supervision is necessary, allowing children some independence also helps them develop confidence and problem-solving skills. T5 explained, "Children should be supervised, but they also need freedom to learn and explore on their own."

Teaching Children About Safety

Beyond physical supervision, parents also emphasized the importance of teaching children how to recognize and avoid dangers while playing. Some parents reported that they constantly reminded their children about safety rules.

P2 stated, "I always tell them not to run near sharp corners or climb on unstable things." Similarly, P9 said, "I teach them that fire, water, and electricity are dangerous, and they should be careful." Teachers supported this approach, stating that early safety awareness helps children make better decisions. T1 commented, "When children understand safety, they learn to be cautious even when parents are not watching."

Modifications to Play Areas for Safety

Many parents made specific modifications to ensure that play spaces were as safe as possible. Some added protective features such as padding on hard floors, fenced-off areas, or designated indoor play zones.

P7 shared, "We put mats in the play area so they don't get hurt when they fall." P13 explained, "Our yard is fenced so they don't run out into the road." Teachers acknowledged that these adjustments significantly contributed to safer play environments. T4 noted, "Simple modifications, like covering sharp edges or securing furniture, make a big difference in preventing injuries."

Parental Engagement in Play-Based Learning

This theme responds to research question number three, which explored the role of parental engagement in play-based learning within the home environment. The findings revealed that parents participate in their children's play in various ways, ranging from direct involvement in play activities to providing materials and creating a supportive atmosphere. The level of engagement varied across households, with some parents actively joining play sessions while others took on more observational roles. The following sub-themes emerged: active participation in play, providing play materials, encouraging independent play, and balancing play with other responsibilities.

Active Participation in Play

Some parents expressed enthusiasm about actively joining their children in play activities, emphasizing that their involvement strengthened their bond with their children and enhanced the learning experience. Parents described engaging in various activities such as playing ball games, role-playing, and storytelling. P5 shared,

"I join them in playing whenever I can. Sometimes, I'm the 'customer' in their pretend shop." P11 added, "I play hide and seek with them. It makes them happy, and we all have fun together." Teachers highlighted that children whose parents actively engage in play often display higher levels of creativity and confidence. T3 noted, "When parents participate in play, children feel encouraged and more excited to explore different activities."

Providing Play Materials

Even when parents were not directly involved in play, they played a crucial role by ensuring that children had access to appropriate play materials. Many parents reported making an effort to provide toys, learning tools, and household items that could be repurposed for play. P8 stated, *"I buy toys when I can, but even when I can't, they use things like old containers and sticks to play."* P16 added, *"I make sure they have crayons and papers for drawing because they love it."*

Encouraging Independent Play

Some parents believed in allowing their children to play independently, arguing that this fosters creativity and problem-solving skills. These parents preferred to observe from a distance, intervening only when necessary. P3 explained,

"I let them play on their own so they can think for themselves." P12 shared, *"I watch them, but I don't always join in because I want them to learn to play without depending on me."*

Teachers acknowledged the value of independent play but also emphasized the importance of occasional parental interaction. T5 stated, *"Children should be given the freedom to explore on their own, but parents stepping in sometimes can make the experience more meaningful."*

Balancing Play with Other Responsibilities

Parents also highlighted the challenges of balancing playtime with household duties and work commitments. Some struggled to find time to engage in play, while others managed by incorporating play into their daily routines. P9 noted,

"I'm always busy with work and house chores, so I don't have much time to play with them." P14 shared, *"I try to involve them in simple tasks that feel like play, like pretending we are racing when cleaning up"*. Teachers acknowledged this challenge and encouraged parents to find simple ways to be involved. T2 advised, *"Even a few minutes of interaction can make a big difference in a child's play experience."*

DISCUSSION ON ACCESSIBILITY OF PLAY SPACES

During interviews, it became evident that the accessibility of play spaces in the home was influenced by a mix of physical limitations, parental choices, and socioeconomic realities. Many parents shared that their homes were small and often overcrowded, making it difficult to allocate space specifically for children's play. For instance, some explained that their children only had a small corner to play in or used the passage in shared apartments. Despite these constraints, parents made efforts to create designated play areas, showing a clear recognition of the importance of play in child development. These findings support Akinpelu and Adeyemi (2021), who observed that although limited space can restrict play, children and their caregivers often adapt creatively to maximize what is available.

Another strong theme that emerged from the interviews was the tension between indoor and outdoor play. Parents voiced concerns about safety, especially in urban areas, leading some to limit their children's play to indoor environments. One parent explained that their child mostly played indoors due to fear of accidents outside, while another preferred outdoor play, highlighting the benefits of fresh air and interaction with other children. Teachers supported both approaches, noting that indoor environments nurtured imagination and problem-solving, while outdoor play promoted physical development and peer relationships. This aligns with the findings of Moyo and Dube (2020), who noted that both types of play environments contribute uniquely to a child's growth but that concerns around safety often shape how parents allow children to access outdoor spaces.

The use of shared versus private play areas also emerged as a significant factor in accessibility. Some families encouraged their children to play in communal areas, such as outside with neighbours' children, whereas others preferred private, family-controlled environments to ensure safety and comfort. Teachers noted that shared

spaces promoted important social skills, as children interacted and learned from each other. This observation reflects Berk and Winsler's (2019) findings that peer interaction during play is a key driver of social development. However, while other scholars such as Pellegrini and Holmes (2019) have highlighted the risks associated with shared spaces—such as conflict or lack of supervision—these issues were not raised by participants in this study, suggesting a level of comfort or trust within their communities.

Socioeconomic status was another strong influence on play accessibility. Parents from higher-income households reported investing in formal play equipment like swings and slides, while those from lower-income backgrounds relied on found objects such as bottles, tyres, and stones. Despite these differences, both groups reported that their children engaged in active, imaginative play. Teachers also emphasised that children's creativity allowed them to turn simple materials into valuable play tools. These findings echo the work of Banda and Chanda (2018), who argued that although access to formal resources varies by income, meaningful play can still occur in low-resource settings due to children's natural inventiveness.

In conclusion, the study revealed a complex picture of how play spaces are accessed within the home. While limitations in space, safety concerns, and income levels all played a role, they did not wholly prevent children from engaging in play. Instead, the interviews highlighted the resilience of children and the commitment of parents to support play, even in challenging conditions.

Discussion on Safety Considerations in Play-Based Learning

The interviews revealed that parents and caregivers placed a high value on ensuring that play-based learning at home occurred in a safe and secure environment. This emphasis on safety shaped the way children engaged in play, influencing the types of activities allowed, the level of independence given, and the physical layout of play areas. The discussion draws on insights from the field while comparing them with findings from other scholars.

A strong focus on hazard prevention was evident in most homes. Parents described proactively removing sharp, breakable, or dangerous items from play areas and checking environments before allowing children to engage in play. These actions demonstrated an intentional effort to create a risk-free environment. Such practices align with the findings of Mwaamba and Chola (2021), who observed that the removal of hazards is a common strategy among Zambian parents to minimise the risk of injury in unsupervised home-based play. Teachers in this study echoed the concern, stressing that children are more likely to engage freely and meaningfully when they feel safe. This observation supports Frost's (2022) argument that safe play environments are foundational to cognitive and emotional development, as fear or injury can hinder exploratory learning.

Parental supervision was another central element in maintaining safety during play. Some parents adopted a close supervision model, staying nearby as their children played, while others allowed for greater independence, offering periodic checks instead. The variation in supervision styles highlighted the balance that many parents tried to maintain between protection and autonomy. This is consistent with Ginsburg's (2023) position that while supervision is vital, overly restrictive monitoring can stifle creativity and self-directed learning. Teachers in this study reinforced this view, suggesting that moderate independence builds resilience and helps children develop self-regulation—a finding that mirrors research by Maynard and Waters (2023), who noted that supervised risk-taking plays a crucial role in early childhood development.

In addition to supervision, many parents placed importance on teaching children to be aware of safety risks themselves. They actively engaged children in conversations about avoiding danger and encouraged them to follow safety rules. These practices promoted the development of self-awareness and responsibility from an early age. Teachers supported this educational approach, explaining that children who understand safety concepts are better equipped to navigate play independently. This reflects findings by Morrongiello and Lasenby-Lessard (2023), who found that parental communication around safety rules significantly reduced injury rates among young children.

Modifying play spaces for safety was also a notable strategy among the families interviewed. From installing soft mats to fencing yards or setting aside specific play zones, parents demonstrated creativity and commitment to ensuring that their children could play without fear of injury. These practical modifications, though sometimes

simple, had a significant impact. Teachers noted that such changes helped reduce accidents and increased the time children spent in play. This resonates with the conclusions of Woolley and Lowe (2020), who argued that environmental design is key in promoting both safety and developmental richness in children's play settings.

Overall, the study revealed that parents were deeply invested in ensuring safe play experiences at home. They employed a mix of hazard prevention, supervision, child education, and spatial modifications to promote safety. These efforts align with broader research showing that when children are allowed to play in secure environments—both physically and emotionally—they are more likely to explore, learn, and thrive. The findings also suggest that safety need not be a barrier to rich play-based learning, but rather, when carefully managed, it can be a strong foundation for it.

Discussion on Parental Engagement in Play-Based Learning

The findings of this study revealed that parents supported play-based learning in their homes through various forms of engagement, ranging from direct involvement in play to provision of materials, encouragement of independence, and creative balancing of playtime with other responsibilities. These patterns of involvement, as shared during interviews, reflected both the value parents placed on play and the practical realities of their daily lives.

Some parents described active participation in play as an enjoyable and fulfilling experience that strengthened the bond with their children. For instance, parents spoke about engaging in games like hide and seek, pretend shopping, or storytelling. Such participation was not only seen as fun but also as a way to enhance their children's learning. One parent shared that being the "customer" in a child's pretend shop allowed the child to use numbers, practice speaking, and build confidence. This direct engagement aligns with the views of Fler (2022), who highlighted that when parents take part in children's play, it fosters imagination, social interaction, and emotional security. Teachers in the study also noted that children whose parents were more involved tended to be more expressive, confident, and willing to engage with others during play.

Even when parents were not actively playing with their children, many ensured that play was supported by providing appropriate materials. Some parents mentioned that they bought toys when they could, while others encouraged children to use household items creatively—such as plastic containers, sticks, or old clothes for dress-up. These accounts mirror the findings of Ginsburg (2023), who argued that children benefit most from materials that encourage open-ended play rather than expensive, structured toys. The parents' efforts to make simple resources available—such as crayons, paper, and makeshift toys—supported an environment where children could explore, create, and express themselves. Teachers recognised this contribution, stating that children's creativity was often sparked by the materials at their disposal, regardless of cost.

The study also found that some parents took a more hands-off approach, preferring to encourage independent play. These parents saw value in letting children play alone or with siblings, explaining that it allowed the children to think independently, solve problems, and build confidence. One parent described watching from a distance while the child played, intervening only when necessary. This belief in the importance of self-directed play reflects Whitebread and Basilio's (2023) emphasis on independent play as crucial for cognitive development and executive functioning. However, teachers in the study noted that while independence is important, occasional parental involvement could enrich play experiences, a view supported by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2021), who promoted guided play as a balance between freedom and structure.

Another important aspect that emerged was the challenge of balancing playtime with work and household responsibilities. Some parents admitted that although they valued play, time constraints often limited their involvement. One parent explained that she rarely had time to play due to work and chores, while another creatively turned cleaning into a game to involve the child while multitasking. This practical approach is consistent with O'Connor and Stagnitti (2011), who found that even short moments of interaction—when embedded in daily routines—can contribute meaningfully to children's development. Teachers encouraged parents to engage in such small, meaningful ways, acknowledging that even minimal interaction could positively influence a child's experience of play.

In summary, the interviews revealed that parental engagement in play-based learning was shaped by a mix of enthusiasm, creativity, and practical limitations. While some parents actively played with their children, others contributed by providing materials, encouraging independence, or creatively integrating play into daily tasks. What remained clear across the interviews was that parental presence—whether physical, material, or emotional—played a pivotal role in enriching the play experiences of children within the home environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study's findings highlight the critical role of parental engagement in play-based learning. The findings align with existing literature on the benefits of active participation, provision of play materials, encouragement of independent play, and balancing play with other responsibilities. However, the study also underscores the challenges that parents face in maintaining consistent engagement, particularly due to time constraints. Future research could explore how various cultural, socioeconomic, and familial factors influence the level of parental engagement in play-based learning and the strategies parents use to overcome challenges in balancing play with other responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for Improving Play Space Accessibility:

Given the physical space constraints identified in many households, it is recommended that parents and caregivers explore creative solutions for maximizing the use of available space. This could involve rearranging furniture to create designated play areas within existing living spaces, or using multi-functional furniture to optimize space in smaller homes. Additionally, local communities and governments could consider creating more accessible communal play areas or supporting initiatives that provide safe outdoor spaces where children can engage in active play.

Recommendation for Enhancing Safety in Play-Based Learning:

To ensure the safety of children during play-based learning, parents should continue prioritizing hazard prevention by regularly inspecting play areas and removing potential risks. However, to further enhance safety, parents could invest in affordable safety modifications, such as corner protectors or non-slip mats, especially for homes with limited space. Furthermore, parental engagement in teaching children about safety rules should be strengthened, and schools or community groups could offer safety workshops for parents and caregivers to learn more about creating safe play environments.

Recommendation for Encouraging Parental Engagement in Play-Based Learning:

It is essential to encourage more parents to actively engage in their children's play, as this has been shown to positively influence creativity, problem-solving, and emotional development. Schools and community centres could organize parent-child play sessions to demonstrate how play can be integrated into daily routines and promote learning. Additionally, parents should be provided with resources on how to balance work responsibilities and active play, such as simple ideas for involving children in daily chores or quick, interactive activities that promote learning. Encouraging parental involvement, even in small ways, could have significant positive effects on children's play experiences.

These recommendations aim to address the barriers and enhance the positive aspects of play-based learning in the home environment.

REFERENCES

1. Akinpelu, A. O., & Adeyemi, B. A. (2021). Exploring spatial constraints and creative adaptations in child play among low-income families in Nigeria. *Early Child Development and Care*, 191(1), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1653554>
2. Banda, M., & Chanda, R. (2018). Play and creativity in resource-constrained Zambian households: A

- qualitative exploration. *Zambia Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 5(2), 45–58.
3. Berk, L. E., & Winsler, A. (2019). *Scaffolding children's learning: Vygotsky and early childhood education*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
4. Chileshe, B., & Mwape, G. (2021). *Parental attitudes and their influence on play-based learning outcomes in Zambia*. Kitwe: Copperbelt University Press.
5. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
6. Fler, M. (2022). *Play and learning in early childhood education*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Frost, J. L. (2022). *A history of children's play and play environments: Toward a contemporary child-saving movement*. Routledge.
8. Ginsburg, K. R. (2023). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697>
9. Henricks, T. S. (2023). *Play reconsidered: Sociological perspectives on human expression*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
10. Kalinde, B., Banda, K., & Munsaka, E. (2024). Early childhood education policy implementation in Zambia. *Journal of Educational Policy Studies*, 58(3), 215–234. Lusaka. Zambia Educational Publishers.
11. Kalinde, B., Sichula, N., Mambwe, R., & Kaluba, C. (2024). Cross-Country Document Analysis of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education in Zambia and Beyond. *Journal of Law and Social Sciences* 5. 1-20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53974/unza.jlss.5.4.1162>.
12. Kaluba, M., Phiri, A., & Banda, K. (2024). Play-based learning and its influence on early childhood education in Zambia. *Early Childhood Education Research Quarterly*, 14(1), 45–60. Lusaka. SAGE Publications.
13. Keung, C. P. C., & Cheung, A. C. K. (2019). Towards holistic supporting of play-based learning implementation in kindergartens: A mixed method study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(5), 627–640.
14. Maynard, T., & Waters, J. (2023). Learning in the outdoor environment: A missed opportunity? *Early Years*, 27(3), 255–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140701594400>
15. Maynard, T., & Waters, J. (2023). Learning in the outdoor environment: A missed opportunity? *Early Years*, 27(3), 255–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140701594400>
16. Morrongiello, B. A., & Lasenby-Lessard, J. (2023). Psychological determinants of risk taking by children: An integrative model and implications for interventions. *Injury Prevention*, 13(1), 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.2006.012658>
17. Morrongiello, B. A., & Lasenby-Lessard, J. (2023). Psychological determinants of risk taking by children: An integrative model and implications for interventions. *Injury Prevention*, 13(1), 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.2006.012658>
18. Moyo, T., & Dube, D. (2020). Parenting practices and children's access to play in urban Zimbabwe: Implications for policy and programming. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(1), 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00261-3>
19. Mulenga, B., & Phiri, C. (2021). Parent-teacher collaboration in promoting play-based learning: A study in Choma District. *Zambian Journal of Educational Studies*, 9(2), 120–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23456789>
20. Munsaka, E., & Kalinde, B. (2017) *Laying the foundation for optimal outcomes in Early Childhood*, University of Zambia Press, Lusaka, 172 pp. (A5), \$12.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-9982-02-099-1. *African Journal of Teacher Education*. 8. Pages 254-260. 10.21083/ajote.v8i0.5470.
21. Mwaamba, C., & Chola, L. (2021). Parental strategies for ensuring child safety during home-based play in Zambian urban households. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Behaviour*, 9(3), 35–41.
22. Mwaamba, S., & Chola, C. (2021). Parental strategies for ensuring child safety during play in selected urban households in Zambia. *Zambia Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 4(2), 45–58.
23. Mwale, M., & Chirwa, B. (2022). Parental perceptions of play-based learning in Kafue District and its developmental implications. *Zambian Journal of Early Childhood Development*, 12(1), 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23456789>
24. Mwansa, G., & Tembo, P. (2023). The role of teachers in implementing play-based learning pedagogy

- in Zambia. *Zambian Journal of Educational Development*, 10(4), 299–312. Lusaka. African Publishing House.
25. Ndlovu, Z., & Mthembu, S. (2021). The role of culturally relevant storytelling in bridging home and school play in South African early childhood education. *African Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 12(2), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/ajecs.v12i2.2021>
26. Niklas, F., Cöhrssen, C., Lehl, S., & Napoli, A. R. (2021). Children's competencies development in the home learning environment. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 706360.
27. O'Connor, D., & Stagnitti, K. (2011). How can parents and teachers use play in early childhood settings? *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 17(2), 142–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-011-0032-3>
28. Pellegrini, A. D., & Holmes, R. M. (2019). *The role of play in human development*. Oxford University Press.
29. Phiri, A., & Banda, K. (2021). *Education policy and practice in Zambia*. Lusaka. Zambia Curriculum Publishing House.
30. Scott, W. (2019). *Thematic analysis for qualitative research: A practical guide*. London: SAGE Publications.
31. Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., & Gilden, R. (2021). *The effectiveness of early education: A review of research*. Institute of Education.
32. Taherdoost, H. (2016). *Sampling methods in research methodology: How to choose a sampling technique for research*. London: How Research Publications.
33. Whitebread, D., & Basilio, M. (2023). The importance of play. *The Cambridge Handbook of Play*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511789381.002>
34. Whitebread, D., & Basilio, M. (2023). *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*. Toy Industries of Europe.
35. Williams, C. (2016). *Research methods*. Chicago, IL: Green Leaf Publishers.
36. Woolley, H., & Lowe, A. (2020). Exploring the relationship between design approach and play value of outdoor play spaces. *Landscape Research*, 38(1), 53–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2011.640432>.